

Chickenpox

What is varicella (chickenpox)?

Chickenpox is an infectious disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus, which results in a blister-like rash, itching, tiredness, and fever. The rash appears first on the stomach and face, but can spread to the entire body.

How do you get chickenpox?

Chickenpox is highly infectious and spreads from person to person by direct contact or through the air from an infected person's coughing or sneezing. A person with chickenpox is contagious 1-2 days before the rash appears and until all blisters have formed scabs. It takes from 10-21 days after contact with an infected person for someone to develop chickenpox.

Are there any complications associated with chickenpox?

About half of all children with chickenpox visit a health care provider due to symptoms of their illness, such as high fever, severe itching, dehydration, or headache. In addition, about 1 child in 10 has a complication from chickenpox serious enough to visit a health care provider. Complications can include infected skin lesions, other infections, dehydration from vomiting or diarrhea, exacerbation of asthma, or more serious complications such as pneumonia. Certain groups of people are more likely to have more serious illness with complications, including adults, infants, adolescents, and people with weakened immune systems either from illness

or medications such as long-term steroids. About 4,000-9,000 people are hospitalized and about 100 people die each year in the U.S. from complications of chickenpox.

Are there any treatments for chickenpox?

Your health care provider will advise you on options for treatment. Acyclovir (a medicine that works against herpes virus) is recommended for persons who are more likely to develop serious disease. There are also remedies to help reduce the itching. Consult with your healthcare provider.

Can chickenpox be prevented?

Yes. Chickenpox can be prevented with a vaccine. Children should get one dose of vaccine between 12 and 18 months of age, or at any age after that if they have never had chickenpox. People who do not get the vaccine until age 13 or older should get two doses, 4 to 8 weeks apart. People who are appropriate candidates with significant exposure may be eligible for another medication.

Who should get vaccinated?

Though the disease is not usually serious in children, it is never possible to predict who will have a mild case or who will have a serious case of chickenpox. For this reason, all children should be vaccinated, in accordance with NH Department of Health and Human Services recommendations.

Adults who have never had chickenpox should also be vaccinated.

Is the vaccine 100% effective?

About 8 to 9 people of every 10 who get the vaccine are completely protected from chickenpox. The vaccine almost always protects against severe disease. If a vaccinated person does get chickenpox it is usually a mild case with fewer blisters and shorter duration. Some people do not develop enough protection from the vaccine to completely prevent them from developing chickenpox.

What if I don't know if I have had chickenpox?

There is a blood test available to determine whether you have had chickenpox.

Will getting the vaccine after exposure prevent chickenpox?

Receiving the vaccine 3 to 5 days after a close exposure may prevent or modify the illness.

Is there anyone who should not receive the vaccine?

Yes. People who have had a serious allergic reaction to chickenpox vaccine, neomycin, or gelatin; people who are unable to fight serious infections because of any kind of cancer; people who receive treatment with drugs such as long-term steroids; people who have received blood products, such as immune globulin or transfusion, during the past five months; and pregnant women should not receive the vaccine.

Can you get chickenpox more than once?

Yes, but it is very uncommon. For most people, one infection is thought to make a person immune for life.

Do children prefer vaccination to having chickenpox?

In a recent study, 7 out of 10 children said given the choice, they'd rather have the shot than have the natural disease. Seven out of 10 children also considered chickenpox to be worse than many other common childhood ailments, including the common cold, earache, sore throat, and fever. The study also found that 3 out of 4 parents are unaware that death is a potential complication of chickenpox.

How long has the chickenpox vaccine been available?

Chickenpox vaccine was licensed by the Food and Drug Administration in 1995 and is now widely available in private doctors' offices and public health clinics.

Is the chickenpox vaccine required for child care and school entry?

Yes. Chickenpox vaccination became a school entry requirement in NH beginning with the 2003-04 school year. More than 20 states have passed such requirements, and many other states are in the process of enacting such requirements.

For specific concerns about chickenpox, call the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Communicable Disease Control Section at 603-271-4496 or 800-852-3345 x4496. For further information, refer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov or the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services website at www.dhhs.nh.gov.